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Feature Essay

THE FUGITIVES, THE AGRARIANS, AND WAR '

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Madden, David *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: The Fugitives, the Agrarians, and War.*

Researching a novel, among the first and most exciting books about the Civil War that I read were biographies by three novelists who were major members of The Fugitives and the Agrarians, groups that sprang up at Vanderbilt in the Twenties and made major contributions to the Southern Literary Renaissance.

Recently I began to wonder, would reading works written by these authors before and after the biographies collectively illuminate our sense of how Southerners viewed the war and its legacy?

Poet Allen Tate's appeared first: *Jefferson Davis, His Rise and Fall: A Biographical Narrative* (JS Sanders & Co., ISBN 1879941244, \$15.95, softcover) and *Stonewall Jackson, The Good Soldier* (JS Sanders & Co., ISBN 1879941023, \$14.95, softcover). "Ode to the Confederate Dead," also published in 1928, is perhaps the single most significant modern poem about the war.

Robert Penn Warren's first book was neither poetry nor fiction but biography: *John Brown, The Making of a Martyr* (JS Sanders & Co, ISBN 1879941198, \$15.95, softcover). The implications generated in Chapter IV, the Civil War chapter, are so pervasive and crucial that I, along with historian T. Michael Parrish, regard *All the King's Men* (Harcourt Brace, ISBN 0151006105, \$30.00, hardcover) as one of the ten greatest Civil War novels. On that list, I also include *Tate's The Fathers* (Swallow Press, ISBN 0804001081, \$9.95, softcover) and Andrew Lytle's *The Long Night* (University of Alabama Press, ISBN 0817304150, \$14.95, softcover).

Two years after Warren's biography of John Brown, Andrew Lytle, strictly a novelist, published *Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company* (JS Sanders &

Co., ISBN 1879941090, \$15.95, softcover), his first book. In 1936, *The Long Night*, one of his finest novels, appeared.

All three writers published memorable essays in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Louisiana State University Press, ISBN 0807103578, \$19.95, softcover). Taken all together, with this book, the work of these novelists/poets constitutes a unique, astonishingly coherent vision of the war and of the contemporary South.

All four Civil War biographies were commissioned by the same publisher, Minton Balch. I like to imagine that the young novelists were offered a way to make money quickly and got engaged with the enterprise because all books rise above such circumstances. The creative energy, passion, and personal commitment is right there on the surface and sinks profoundly into the reader's consciousness; years later, that intellectual and poetic energy still resonates. Discover for yourself.

While you still can. Having discovered that all four books were out of print and were costly in the rare book trade, I urged every publisher with whom I came in contact to reprint them, preferably as a boxed set, so that one could read them all at once in the context of their Fugitive and Agrarian roots. Warren and Lytle were still alive at that time and still publishing, 50 years later. Finally, I persuaded John Sanders, who brought them out one by one. Although Sanders sold his excellent small publishing house, the books are still in print. It is likely the print run will sell out soon and when it does, I will gladly leap into the saddle once more to whip up enthusiasm for reprinting all.

Meanwhile, now that all three are among the dead, we may look in vain for individuals or groups who are doing similarly major work in multiple genres in the effort, a century and a half long, to make Walt Whitman's phrase "the unwritten war" fade away like a grand old soldier.

Founding Director of The United States Civil War Center, David Madden is the author of seven novels, including Sharpshooter (1996), two collections of short stories, and editor of The Legacy of Robert Penn Warren (2000) and two nonfiction works on the Civil War. He is co-editor of the Classics of Civil War Fiction series for the University of Alabama Press.